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ABSTRACT

The obstacles associated with conducting curricular research in school settings are discussed. A study of bilingual students in the Phoenix area demonstrated the difficulties associated with high absenteeism and drop out rates. In a study of Spanish reading materials, it proved difficult to identify schools where administrators would be willing to allow a study in which Hispanic students would be encouraged to read books, magazines, and related materials in Spanish during their free reading time. A serious problem in high school studies was the policy of having students whose English reading skills had improved substantially transfer into the regular curriculum before there was an opportunity to posttest them. Researchers contemplating school based curricular studies need to be aware of the increased logistic and personnel difficulties associated with bilingual education. These include greater difficulty in securing district approval, philosophical opposition by many school administrators and teachers, more difficulty in getting teachers to implement bilingual instruction with integrity, greater opposition from parents, greater difficulty in securing the cooperation and interest of U.S.-born Hispanics, and the unavailability of good curricular materials in Spanish. (RW)

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Obstacles to Conducting Curricular Research in Bilingual Education: A Case Study

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Bilingual education has aroused strong emotions in the hearts and minds of many people in the U.S. There are those who strongly oppose bilingual education at all levels -- philosophically, politically, emotionally and educationally; there are those who vigorously support it for the same reasons. During the past four years we have conducted several studies pertaining to bilingual education in the classroom that involved many teachers and schools from elementary through the high school level (Schon, Hopkins & Davis, 1981; Schon, Hopkins & Vojir, 1982; Schon, Hopkins & Vojir, in press).

Curricular research in any area is difficult to implement in school settings, but research in bilingual education has been even more difficult than anticipated. Obstacles are encountered which are not evident in other areas of curricular research in education. In order to be realistic in designing bilingual curricular research studies in the school setting, researchers need to be aware of the unique problems associated with school administrators, teachers, students, parents, and curricular materials. Our experiences in this regard should be useful to other researchers.

Study I

The first study required many books in Spanish, written for easy readability. Locating and acquiring entertaining books in Spanish for young readers is always a difficult task. Many books in Spanish (Schon, 1977; Schon, 1978) are dull

by comparison to the wide variety of attractive and entertaining books for young readers available in English. There is a shortage of interesting informational and recreational books in Spanish. This problem is acknowledged by many educators and librarians in the U.S. and in most Spanish-speaking countries.

The first study was conducted in four elementary schools in the greater Phoenix area. From the beginning serious difficulties were encountered. Not only were there very few bilingual (English-Spanish) classes in the metropolitan area, but even with the support of the State Director of Bilingual Education, few school districts were interested in bilingual education and research. Some districts responded that they did not believe in bilingual education, others said that their bilingual classes (teachers) were not ready for research in this field. Obtaining district-level approval for a study is difficult in any area of educational research, but our experience suggests that it is even more difficult when the topic pertains to bilingual education.

Even after district approval was secured, it was found that in one elementary school in which 34% of the students were Hispanic, one of the principals, himself a bilingual Hispanic, was opposed to bilingual education. His negative influence soon spread to his teachers which undermined the study. The senior author (a bilingual educator) visited the participating teachers in this school biweekly for purposes of monitoring and assisting them in the use of the bilingual materials. Even though the teachers had earlier agreed to participate in the study, several of the teachers were subsequently unwilling to use the books in Spanish. One teacher was so negative that she requested not to be monitored for the remainder of the study and was strongly supported by the principal.

Another serious problem was evident from the biweekly monitoring. Many of the teachers emphasized reading instruction in English, even though as bilingual

teachers, they were supposed to teach reading in Spanish to those children whose dominant language was Spanish. These teachers were convinced that their students would fall behind in English reading, consequently they never actually implemented the bilingual treatment. Their students were seldom exposed to the books in Spanish which were provided for their use.

Some parents, Hispanic and Anglo, also objected to the study. They contacted the school principal, protesting the Spanish and attitude tests which were given to their children. They wanted to be assured that their children were not going to be put in bilingual classes or that the school was not segregating their children from English-speaking children.

The only apparent problem with the students in study I was the high absenteeism and drop-out rate which eliminated many pretest and/or posttest scores which were needed in the analysis. Thus, an atypically large proportion of subjects were lost in the study which attenuated both the external validity and statistical power of the study.

Study II

Desirable reading materials in Spanish are even in shorter supply for adolescents than for children. Teenage contemporary novels, like those popular in the United States, are almost nonexistent in Spanish. There are a few sports stories, mysteries and western novels; but it is indeed difficult to find entertaining novels and informative books in Spanish for junior high students. This deficiency was ameliorated somewhat by using a great variety of magazines, newspapers and comic books; nevertheless, this is a major obstacle for Spanish-speaking young readers the world over (Schon, in press).

It was even more difficult to identify junior high schools where district and school administrators would be willing to allow a study in which Hispanic

students would be encouraged to read books, magazines, newspapers, and comic books in Spanish during their free reading time in their reading classes. The one junior high school that was willing to participate was somewhat unrepresentative of the schools in the target population. The school is situated in an upper-middle socio-economic area and has a substantial percentage of Hispanic students who are bussed from a low-income area. The Anglo and Hispanic students are therefore atypically diverse.

The principal and assistant principal were both bilingual Hispanics, yet neither was favorably inclined toward the bilingual treatment and they failed to cooperate with the study in various ways. For example, when a Spanish Book Fair was scheduled months in advance, the announcements printed at the District office were never distributed to the teachers. Also, the weekly Spanish newspaper, El Sol, was seldom put in the teachers' mail boxes and was often kept in unopened packages in a corner of the mail room or near the trash cans. The administrators' attitudes influenced the clerical staff and secretary of the school who also appeared to resent the school's participation in a "bilingual study." They commented that the students were not interested in "all those Spanish materials."

The most serious problem caused by the school's administration was the lack of cooperation with the posttesting. It was made known to the teachers in various ways that cooperating in posttesting was not really important and that teachers could convey to their students that they need not be concerned about testing. Hence, many students arrived late and left early, or missed entirely, the days the posttests were scheduled.

Of the sixteen teachers involved with the bilingual materials, only five (two Hispanics and three Anglos) appeared to be genuinely concerned about their

Hispanic students' low reading abilities and attitudes; they also tended to be the most enthusiastic about the study. The others were perfunctory in their implementation of the recommended procedures or were, in fact, opposed to providing free time for Spanish reading and were especially critical of the Spanish reading materials which had been sent to their classes. Several of these teachers appeared to be pleased to relate to the monitoring author that "the Hispanic students were not interested in the newspapers in Spanish" and that they kept "throwing them away." These teachers would not allow interested Anglo students to read Spanish books in their classes.

As in study I, several Hispanic parents called the school objecting to the Spanish and attitude testing. Their concerns were mainly that, (1) they did not wish to have their children in bilingual classes, or (2) that the attitude tests not be used in any way to discriminate against the Hispanic students. The parents were satisfied when reassured that their children would not be forced to read any of the Spanish materials and that the attitude tests (taken anonymously) were for program evaluation purposes only.

The most serious problem with the junior-high students was their lack of cooperation in the pretesting and posttesting. As previously stated, many of them may have reflected their teachers' and administrators' negative attitudes toward the study, but it was apparent from the very beginning that many, if not most, Hispanic students did not wish to be associated with any Spanish materials or Spanish testing. As in study I, an unusually large percentage of subjects were lost due to absenteeism or lack of cooperation.

Studies III and IV

These studies were conducted in high schools with a substantial proportion of Hispanic students. In both studies only low-English-reading ability Hispanic

students were available, as these were the students which most seriously concerned the district administrators. All of the students in Studies III and IV were initially enrolled in remedial reading classes.

A serious problem in the high school studies was the policy of having students whose English reading skills improved substantially transfer into the regular curriculum before there was an opportunity to posttest them. The best-reading students were thus lost to the study.

In one of the high schools, the students' schedules were changed to such an extent after the first semester, that the prior designation of experimental and control classes could be maintained no longer. Consequently, this study which was designed as a year-long experiment had to be curtailed to a one-semester study.

In contrast to studies I and II, the high school administrators recognized the academic problem with Hispanic high school students and were quite supportive of the studies. Many teachers, however, were unsympathetic to the study. A few were enthusiastic about the treatment and truly tried to get Hispanic students interested in reading in Spanish. A few teachers seemed to be quite upset about giving Hispanic students the opportunity to read in Spanish. But most teachers operated their classes in a perfunctory manner.

The major problem encountered in the high school studies resulted from the students themselves. It must be emphasized that they were all Hispanics of low-English-reading ability. Many U.S.-born Hispanics were openly resentful about the Spanish testing and were indignant that they had to participate in the study. Most U.S.-born Hispanics seemed to be embarrassed about being associated with reading materials in Spanish and rarely, if ever, used these materials. It is important to note, however, that Hispanics born in Mexico were delighted to find reading material in Spanish in their classes and eagerly participated in every

aspect of the studies, including the testing. Many of the Hispanic students from Mexico who were not in the study, because they did not require remedial reading, when they became aware of the existence of these materials, went out of their way to get access to them by begging their teachers or borrowing them from other students in the experimental classes.

As previously mentioned, reading materials in Spanish for young adults are scarce and the few that are available do not have the high reader appeal that is so obvious in books in English for young adults. This may have been a geniune reason why some of the U.S.-born Hispanics, who could have been attracted to some of the Spanish reading material, ultimately gave up. These Spanish materials could not compete with the variety and high interest of the novels for young adults available in English in all their classes. Our purpose is not to be unduly critical of the Spanish reading materials, but to point out this as a source of confounding in the studies. Ideally, English and Spanish materials would be equal in all respects except language, but that is not the case at the present time.

Summary

Researchers contemplating school-based curricular studies need to be aware of the increased logistic and personnel difficulties associated with bilingual education. These include: (1) greater difficulty in securing district approval, (2) philosophical opposition by many school administrators and teachers, (3) more difficulty in getting teachers to implement bilingual instruction with integrity, (4) greater opposition from parents, (5) greater difficulty in securing the cooperation and interest of U.S.-born Hispanics and (6) the unavailability or limited availability of curricular materials in Spanish of comparable quality to those available in English.

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